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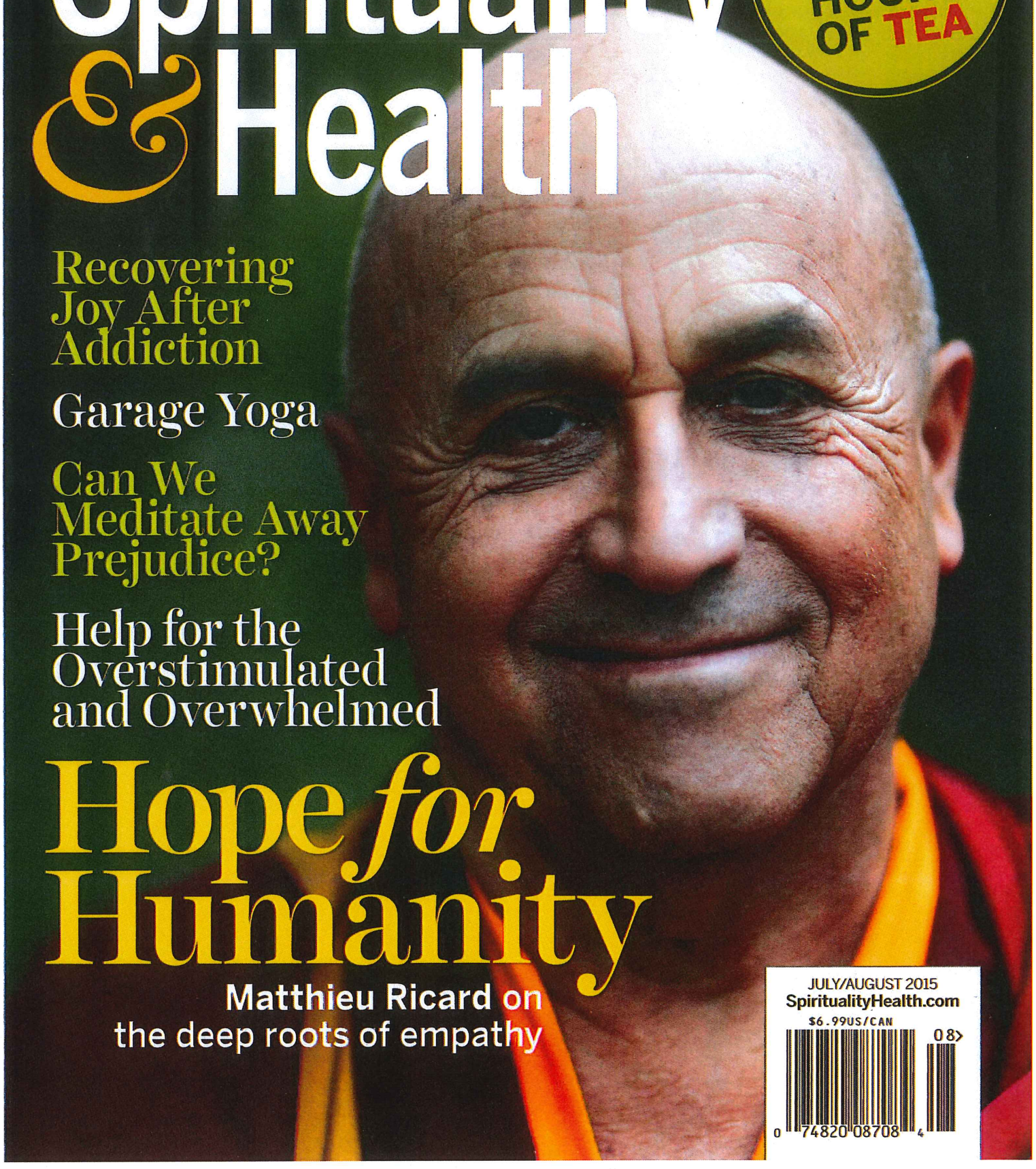

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The Practical Balance of Crane Conservation

To hunters, cranes are "ribeye in the sky," but they're much more valuable alive.

YOU MIGHT EXPECT an organized birdwatching trip to begin serenely in the predawn dark and quiet. But birdwatchers at the Crane Trust start their journey in a brightly lit room, being preemptively chided by a naturalist. "We want you all to have a good time, but the birds are our big concern," says Karen Krull Robart, glaring around the room. "Nothing happens in the viewing blind that hurts my cranes." The light from your cell phone? Conversations above a whisper? Expect ejection. And if your camera looks like it might even think about flashing, she's happy to cover it with black electrical tape.

Welcome to the sandhill crane migration on Nebraska's Platte River. Every March, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes converge in central Nebraska, fattening up on corn waste for their migration to Alaska, Canada, and Siberia. The sight and sound of thousands of birds landing, dancing, sleeping, squawking, and taking off in great clouds is a spiritual experience, but nowadays, that depends on human intervention. Without passionate defenders like Robart, the cranes' habitat would shrink to nothing. Crane tourism in Nebraska is an intricate blend of conservation, business interests, practicality, love of animals, and the romance of the prairie.

The Crane Trust originally sprang from a 1978 court settlement to appease conservationists about a new dam 400 miles upriver. It focuses on preserving 4,500 acres of native grassland prairie, so whooping cranes, sandhill cranes, and other migratory birds will continue to have a safe and fruitful stopover spot. Much of the Platte's water has been drained off for agriculture and municipal use. But Crane Trust president and CEO Chuck Cooper respects the farmers' need for water. "Nebraska corn feeds the world," he said. "There's a tradeoff, which could be hunger."

Managing a disappearing habitat takes effort. The trust's small, hardworking staff use a Caterpillar Challenger 55 tractor and a Kershaw Klearway brush cutter to clear vegetation off riverine islands so that cranes will have the open areas they need to roost and watch for predators. This year they introduced a small herd of bison to further recreate the prairie's pre-white person normalcy. Under the leadership of Cooper—an ex-pharmaceutical VP who left the corporate world to aid struggling nonprofits—the trust has branched out from its scientific mission, adding tourism into the mix. Visitors can now stay on-site in cabins, partying quietly in the VIP blind, and enjoying dinnertime entertainment by a cowboy guitarist.

About 30 miles west of the Crane Trust, the town of Kearney bills itself as "the sandhill crane capital of the world." Birdwatchers flock to the 2,416-acre Rowe Sanctuary for guided tours and blinds that provide excellent views of the migrating cranes. Audubon purchased this land in 1974 from local landowners. In an effort to maintain good relations with neighboring ranchers and other agricultural business concerns, Rowe proudly pays

Visitors to Rowe and the Crane Trust must rise hours before dawn, brave temperatures as low as 20 degrees, endure porta-potties at best, keep their mouths shut and their electronics off until the cranes fly off to feed. But it's these deprivations that allow people to briefly enter another world. What, you're waiting for a vital email? No matter to the cranes, who do what they have done for millions of years: Wake up, squawk, flap, and fly off in family groups to forage. The guides say cranes are the only birds that dance just for the fun of it. At night, there can be 60,000 cranes huddled together in the Platte. Open a window at the Crane Trust cabin and you hear them purring like winged cats.

property taxes rather than invoking its nonprofit exemption.

Rowe supplements its staff with avid volunteers. Your guide could be a local from Kearney, or a retiree from another state or country who's staying in volunteer housing. "It's a cushy volunteer job," said Gail Mayo, a volunteer from Fairbanks, who returned for a second stint at Rowe in March of this year. Local businesses love Rowe, she said, and constantly bring food to the volunteers—and it's no wonder. Crane tourism brings in somewhere between $10 and $25 million per year. Unlike neighboring states, hunters aren't allowed to shoot sandhill cranes—also known as "ribeye in the sky"—in Nebraska. The birds have proven themselves more valuable alive than dead.

"Cranes mean almost as much to me as my children and grandchildren," says Robart. "My family knows if I ever get amnesia, to play the sound of cranes. I will either remember who I am or think I'm a crane." Either way, she's okay with it. And visitors might also find themselves wanting to enter into the lives of these ancient birds.

—TERESA BERGEN



Rising Up
Betony Coons

WHAT **YOU** CAN DO

If You Have a **Minute**...

Check out the cranes using the Rowe Crane Cam (rowe.audubon.org/crane-cam).

If You Have an **Hour**...

Write a letter to your government officials telling them that you support land conservation, or a letter to the editor of your local paper about a land-management issue in your area.

If You Have **a Month**...

Volunteer! The Rowe Sanctuary (rowe.audubon.org) and the Crane Trust (cranetrust.org) both need volunteers as guides, in the visitor center, and for other projects.

If You Have **One Hundred Dollars**...

Donate to one of these crane-focused organizations, or another group that's conserving an animal or terrain that is meaningful to you.